Postcard from the Smoke

Of our first six months there—in my memory fog, six months of winter, winter—I can tell you almost nothing. I was six. South Africa was a world away. We were free. About all I recall’s the cold, and how cramped our lodgings were, and how foreign I was made to feel. But then came summer—and a new house; ours! With trees, and six weeks of no school! I was restored! So that the second winter—no doubt less terrible, since I recall it—hit back hard.

I was given, I remember, a pet, a hamster. Poor thing.

The house came with a coal scuttle, bigger than I was, which for the English cold seemed not near big enough. Since London, sick of its smogs, was going smokeless, it came not with coal but with a residue of coal, called *coke.* So that still, when I hear the word *coke,* I picture neither a drug nor a soft drink, but a small, soft animal, whom I neglected, who so hated his cage he escaped and he escaped, out into the yard, into the pitch dark of the coal scuttle. Until one day I found him crushed by a great coke rubble—which glittered in the late light, for its grey char skins were streaked with pallor.

How, I thought, as I lifted it off of him, could this little scree have weight enough to kill him? Unless, perhaps, he wished it to, burrowing and scrabbling to be pinned?

There's not much left in me of who I was then, at six, at seven, neither of memory nor misery nor sullen dumb ingratitude—barely enough, I’d have thought, to make a poem—but look, I scrawl and I scratch a bit, and how once I get it rolling their weight still batters!

The Wind in Ragged Roses

wind in ragged roses

a scleral dome of sky

a hillside of squat houses

jaundicing the eye

the I threaded through thousands

whose faces someone knows

their subtly unique houses

that wind in ragged rows

schoolgirls in shabby blazers

sparrows in Dutch elms

the wind, in trees and roses,

that woos, and overwhelms

the fading lives and colours

the dusty whites and greys

the old men tending dahlias

by dual carriageways

their quiet compromises

I will come to understand

the wind in ragged roses

ragged roses in the wind

A Little Love Poem

 “Use *love* sparingly.”

 “I try to avoid the word *little*, because it has sentimental shimmers.”

 Two bits of advice from poets at a poetry conference

Nothing’s more fun to say, or truer, than *I love you*.

Screw *sparingly*. I get sentimental shimmers

when I think about my difficult little

life and all the friends in it

I’ve loved. Once, when I was little,

there was a hill I loved to climb to watch the sun

go down on Romford, less for the sunset than the streetlights

coming on through blades of grass, the high stars overhead. I could

catch the whole sweet hometown in my little palm, squeeze it

half to death as I thought it did me. *Love heals,*

*love lets* *go*, somebody’s poster said,

and so I chanted a few puppet *if*s like little prayers,

closed my grasp on my own little skin, and loved it whole again.

Sometimes it hits me that the perfect life

might be a moonlight hermit’s on some hill,

balancing my hand above the useful sprawl of my fat city—

no puppetry of strings except love’s fond imaginings—

me and the high stars, and this grasping, hard,

unsparingly loved little world.

Fool's Gold Heart

I have a fool's gold heart

I bought at the gift shop

of the half-wild Romford park

where I fled my adolescence—

cloistering my way up

out of noise and nuisance

to its hay meadow summit;

to watch the moonrise from it;

or once, in dark so blind

I couldn't see my hands,

to blunder through its woods

until my sobbed breath slowed.

Later, grown and gone,

I came back, sometimes, still—

my father hiked these hills

with me into his eighties,

on my quick visits home—

but he died; and now our house

is up for sale—and lately

I'll fondle this little piece

of gilt rough-hew as if

the shatter of my life's

the haunt and glint of it,

hay-scented and starlit;

the streetlamps coming on

below in Romford's dark;

where I grew, and am gone;

but keep my fool's gold heart.

Walking to Westminster Abbey

The way the wind tonight moves into the plum tree and fills it with itself reminds me of someone I met once, a dusk-headed boy, teaching himself a song. It’s midnight, Romford, 1964. We’re a teen flock of drowsy pilgrims, gathering in the St. Edward's forecourt. Wind lifts its dark whisper, I’m opening my eyes to wade into it, and he has leaned against the rail that separates the trimmed grass from the cemetery, to breathe out in a lilt of measures, in a voice recently broken, in syllables that louden into words and tune.

We walk. Like him, I walk apart, my brother’s tagalong. A trick of night soft-focuses the London Road, turns buses lovely. By 1 a.m. his song has learned its contours, something about a road and the moon, the silver fluttering of stars through trees, and I’ve fallen in step, discreetly to one side, enough space for the night to fit between. Quietly I feel his singing fill it, fill it with himself and with the song he’s conjuring—the way the wind tonight in our Richmond plum tree makes things visible, reshaping its notes to show us: *wind,* *tree*, *night*.

His name is Simon. He’s my age, he laughs; he laughs like me. We let the talk drift, sounding out the likenesses. The song’s not anything, something he’s working on, not much.

The way words tonight loom up from darkness recalls to me that night of walking, of following on faith its moonlit road between somewhere and somewhere. And all the small pilgrimages of talk to follow, of reaching out to love, to pry from the hammering heart what it guards and tenders.

This time was not long after my first communion, we were walking all night to take communion, there was a God I had faith I'd come to believe in. Sometimes, in the soft focus of the Romford dark, I’d almost see Him, as simply lovely as this road and moon, a life filling us with who we might become. The way I would come, eleven years later, to America, following a girl with blue eyes.

Puzzle Box

Not the batch of arrowheads Cindy

swore she gave dad for his birthday

and wants back but that puzzle box

my merchant seaman uncle got me,

where I stashed my coin collection.

And once I have prized free the lid

(my hands after fifty years still knowing

each slat and sequence to slide them in)

to finger its muck and booty, I remember

that yes, if I flip the thing, and yes, if I

work this wedge, it’ll spring a drawer with

a bird painted on the lid, that’ll sing at me

as it unseals a second cache. Which in turn—

coins from countries I've never seen, some

of them long gone, clattering into the clutter

of the extinct English ones, farthings, halfpennies,

threepences, shillings, florins—unjangles me a

memory of my late aunt Monica, hoisting two

Victorian pennies, one with its trident upright,

one with it spiking Britannia's crotch, asking,

*Know* *why* *they call this a Honolulu penny, Derek?*

*Because it's on her lulu*. And cackling her cracked

aunt laugh. For I am 16, and mortally embarrassed.

And now he is with the dead, with her, with my

merchant seaman uncle Ted, and I am winnowing

into keepsakes and trash dad’s hoard of junk.

No treasures, really, not even Cindy’s arrowheads,

just these ghost dusts that tickle my nostrils

as I forage. Oh you. Oh her. Oh him. Oh

me, my heart’s pyrite glints, its gleam of trove.

Rag-and-Bone Song

Sixty years my mother

has lived in this house.

The rag-and-bone man, once,

with his clopping carthorse

rode by once a week,

to offer the clink

of his coin for our junk.

It has piled up high, since.

Blue tits pecked glass-

bottled milk on this porch.

That lamp-post was stumps

for our street cricket match.

I stuff plastic sacks

with a half-century's trash

that my mother sets back,

as *still useful, Derek.*

There was a fine sing-song cry

to announce he had come

that the rag-and-bone man

used to holler back then:

more the sweet rasp

of a four-note bird song

than words one might grasp—

more clatter than clause.

*Any lumber?* I sang,

though I knew the line wrong—

I did ask, but he'd laugh,

twitch the reins, and clop off.

It comes noising again

as I pick through the trees

that leaf-frisk the years

between now and then

for glints I might spin

to some jingle of coin.

Last slants of caught sun.

Turned notes of a tune.